



Statewide observance aimed at demystifying adoption

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KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

Donald Freeman was dying of lung cancer in Sarasota, Fla., in October of 1999 when a letter from a stranger lit up his life.

Gayle Gennett of Charlevoix had sent out several letters in Florida looking for her birth mother. One of them found its way to Freeman and his wife, Bobbe, who happened to be Gennett's birth mom. And it signaled the end of a regrettable secret Donald and Bobbe Freeman had been keeping from their own three daughters.

Bobbe Freeman was pregnant with Gennett when she met Donald Freeman in 1949. She agreed to give Gennett up for adoption so she could start a fresh, new family with Donald Freeman. Gennett was born Oct. 21, 1949. The Freemans were married in January of 1950.

Was that the right decision? Was keeping it secret the right thing to do?

That 1999 letter and subsequent correspondence on the day it was received allowed Donald Freeman to let go of the guilt and nagging questions, Bobbe Freeman said.

He died the next day.

"It was a big wow," Bobbe Freeman said by phone from her home in Sarasota, Fla. "He got to see photos of her."

The Freemans' story and others about adoption will be shared when Kalamazoo County celebrates Michigan Adoption Day on Tuesday from 9:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Crosstown Center, 150 E. Crosstown Parkway.

Freeman will travel to Kalamazoo to talk to anyone she can at the event and to spend time with Family Division Judge Patricia Conlon, one of the participating judges. Conlon and Gennett grew up as sisters in Detroit and Dearborn.

Several judges will hold confirmation hearings to finalize 11 adoptions. Parents who are adopting and their relatives will share feelings about adoption and about the children they are adopting, said Sue Darling, a coordinator of the event.

A panel of adoptive parents, social-service-agency personnel, adults who were adopted as children and birth mothers will answer questions from the public about domestic and foreign adoptions. Local adoption agencies will provide literature and answer questions.

An estimated 33 counties in Michigan will offer similar adoption- awareness events. It is the first time a statewide effort to stimulate awareness of adoption has been done, Darling said. The event is sponsored by the Michigan Supreme Court and the Family Independence Agency.

The number of children within the state available for adoption far exceeds the number of children adopted, figures show. At the end of 2002, there were 4,615 permanent state wards available for adoption while 2,833 adoptions were finalized that year.

What happened to the Freemans and Gennett concerns a common question people have about adoption: What happens when adopted children try to find their birth parents?

"It is a very personal thing and it is different for every person or family," Gennett said. "It is not in all cases, but I was lucky."

Gennett's adoptive father asked her to seek out her birth mother while he was ill once, she said. He wanted to thank the mother for giving Gennett up for adoption.

"I had always been curious, but I didn't want to upset anybody's family or cause concern with my birth mom," Gennett said. "But my father felt it was an important thing to do, also for potential medical questions."

Michelle Mixon, who will be adopting Roger Lee Williams, 8, on Adoption Day, decided to adopt Roger after caring for him as a foster parent.

She is a foster mom who has taken care of Roger and his brothers, Dominique and Justin. She adopted Dominique last year and is now adopting Roger because adoption options for the boys were bleak and she didn't want them to be separated. Justin was successfully adopted by another family.

"I couldn't see separating him and Dominique. They had always been together. They had been moved twice but always together," Mixon said. "Roger always felt like family, like part of my other children. He also filled some emptiness in my life. My other children are all grown and gone."

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